

Photovoice as an innovative research tool in the Social Sciences for addressing gender barriers: Report Activity

Building on a partnership between Canadian and African researchers and community-based organizations, an interdisciplinary research team from McGill University, Montreal, Canada Dr. Myriam Gervais, Prof. Claudia Mitchell and Lysanne Rivard conducted a visual methodology workshop with third year sociology students at the National University of Rwanda, June 11, 2011. The research team, called femSTEP (led by Dr. Myriam Gervais, Prof. Claudia Mitchell and Dr. Eliane Ubalijoro), focuses on the study of the needs and constraints of rural women, and on the day-to-day inequalities that are experienced by young girls and women living in poverty in Rwanda and in the Eastern Africa sub-region. The overall goal of the work is to develop innovative research methods that will incorporate rural girls and women's tacit knowledge, alongside expert perspectives, into development programs and into rural female poverty reduction strategies.

As a key aspect of the research of femSTEP, the team is using photovoice, a participatory visual methodology, as an active consultation tool with girls and women. Currently they are using this tool in a pilot study on the use of photovoice with women working in agriculture and with rural girls in Rwanda.

The session at NUR with the more than 80 students enrolled in a methods class, along with several lecturers, was divided into two parts. In the first part, Dr. Gervais spoke about the need to go beyond the debate about quantitative vs. qualitative research in favour of promoting collaboration between and amongst social science researchers, scientists, policy makers and rural women. What is needed, she indicated in her presentation, are new research tools which can facilitate gender based research but which render women's perspectives visible.

In the second part of the session the students were given the opportunity to participate in a hands-on photovoice activity. The students used digital cameras in small groups to represent through photographs their ideas on challenges and solutions for female students in Higher Education in Rwanda. The results of their photovoice activity pointed to a number of critical challenges and solutions: lack of safe accommodation for females on campus; transactional sex related to off campus housing, and unwanted pregnancy. Their solutions pointed to the importance of a variety of measures such as government support for girls' education, and improved housing.

The participants were enthusiastic in their response to the photovoice activity and spoke about how they might use this approach in their own research. This was clearly more than just a 'once-off event' in that the students will be pursuing with their lecturers further analysis of the photographs in follow up classes in Sociology and Communication Studies.

The femSTEP research team gratefully acknowledges the support of the senior management and lecturers who assisted in the organization of the workshop: Dr. Musahara Herman, Vice Rector for Academic Affairs; Dr. Jean de la Croix Nkurayija, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Media and Social Sciences; Dr. Peter Isaboke, HoD Social Sciences; the Honorable Euthalie Nyirabega; Dr. Simeon Wiehler; Charles Kalinganire; and Jean-Paul Habineza.

For further information, please contact Dr. Myriam Gervais at myriam.gervais@mcgill.ca